

# Painting Perceptions

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## JANICE NOWINSKI: RECENT PAINTINGS

October 19, 2021 By [Larry](#) [Leave a Comment](#)

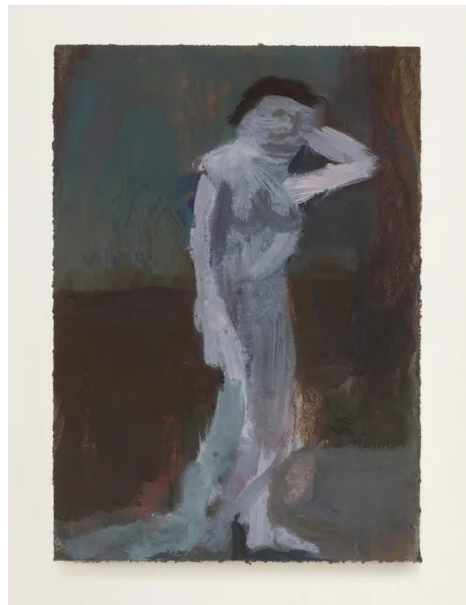
REVIEW BY [JOHN GOODRICH](#), GUEST CONTRIBUTOR

JANICE NOWINSKI: RECENT PAINTINGS AT [THOMAS ERBEN GALLERY](#) THROUGH OCTOBER 20, 2021



*Nude in Front of Mirror*, 2021. Oil on canvas, 14 x 11 in. image courtesy of Thomas Erben Gallery

Janice Nowinski's paintings perform a neat bit of deception. They're usually fairly dark and small in scale, and yet they somehow feel buoyant and expansive. Her forms are awkward, their details abbreviated, but the images feel strangely, eloquently truthful. The artist has explored a range of subjects over the years, including still life, figures in interiors and landscapes, and interpretations of masters' paintings. But it's another of the artist's sources – nineteenth-century boudoir photos – that inspired a number of the paintings in the artist's current show at Thomas Erben. These vintage photos are a particularly felicitous motif for the artist; they're a starting point for investigations of form and space that turn the pale, anonymous nudes into earthily resonant humans. In Nowinski's interpretations, their faces remain cyphers – not much more than scribbles, in some cases – and their emotional lives as remote as ever, but one feels, viscerally, their personal occupation of space.



*Blue Nude*, 2018. Oil on primed linen panel, 7 x 5 in., image courtesy of Thomas Erben Gallery

Stare at these paintings for a while, and one realizes that a deft sense of color energizes each element, making it crucial to the cohering space. In “Blue Nude” (2018), a narrow tower of light, almost monochromatic notes becomes a figure against a background of warm and cool darks. Nowinski’s brushstrokes are invariably colorful, even when near-black or barely off-white, and in this tiny, seven-inch-tall painting they conjure a surprisingly complete impression of not just the scene’s illumination, but even the figure’s resistance to gravity. Building one upon the other, the colors of her form rise sturdily to culminate in the brightest note, the horizontal of a lifted arm.



*Two Nudes*, 2020. Oil on linen, 12 x 16 in., image courtesy of Thomas Erben Gallery

One contemporary approach to the figure is to render it as a series of symbols: signs for eyes, mouth, arm. This is arguably a more sophisticated, contemporary approach, in which artists examine their own process as much as

they observe their subject matter. Nowinski appears to proceed more innocently, and to look more deeply at colors and forms, relying on these purely visual elements to coalesce in a vitalized version of her motif. "Two Nudes" (2020) is a fine example; glints of color set off a shifting nest of space between two women. Pick any points – the lightened hip of the nearer figure, say, against the more muted hues of the second nude's shoulders (themselves minutely different) – and one senses a continuous activation of space that nudges forms into rhythmic life.



*Nude Holding a Wine Glass*, 2020. Oil on canvas, 14 x 11 in., image courtesy of Thomas Erben Gallery

Viewers will almost always be aware of their vantage point in a Nowinski painting – what elements they look down at, which rise above the point of view – so that the spaces unfold before the eye. The effect is particularly strong in "Nude Holding a Wine Glass" (2020), which leads the viewer's eye, step by downward step, from the orb of the face, to the more neutral plane of the upper chest, then the barely cooler belly, and finally to intimations of a leg at the very bottom edge of the painting. (Or is it fabric, not a leg? The placement of forms so secure is that they persuade, even when unidentifiable.) The ruddy shadows of the upper arm, set against lighter skintones – along with the pressures of a dozen other hues – are enough to make gesture, figure and environment palpably alive. It's a sensation one feels again and again in this exhibition of small, rawly fashioned images – the ring of truth, sounding loud and clear.

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